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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effects of four writing strategies on fifth graders' idea production across three aims of discourse (informative, expressive, and persuasive) and the effect of gender. The four strategies tested were clustering, drawing, freewriting, and thinking. More than 100 children from varied socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic groups in each of the 4fifth grade, public school classrooms participated in the study which took place in a southwestern suburban city. All members of a given class used the same strategy: Visible Drawers drew before writing their compositions; Think Timers did no overt planning, but were asked to recall and think about what they knew and might write about their topics; Freewriters produced a draft by writing continuously and as rapidly as possible throughout prewriting sessions; and Clusterers selected keywords or phrases to represent their topics. After strategy training, each student wrote three compositions--an expressive, an informative, and a persuasive. Compositions were scored. Data were subjected to three tests of statistical significance. All three tests indicated that Freewriters and Clusterers produced significantly more written propositions than were produced by Visible Drawers and Think Timers. However, in no case was the numerical difference between scores of these two least productive groups found to be statistically significant. Data also indicated that fifth graders can write for a variety of aims, though they tended to produce the greatest number of written ideas when writing informative papers and the fewest for persuasive. Strategies were equal for male and female. (NKA)

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# The Effects of Four Writing Strategies on Fifth Graders' Production of Written Ideas Across Three Aims of Discourse.

by Elaine Danielson Fowler

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**The Effects of Four Writing Strategies on Fifth Graders' Production of Written Ideas Across Three Aims of Discourse.**

**Elaine Danielson Fowler**

**Introduction.** Writing can be a tricky business for anyone, but especially for young children. Until the 70's, little attention was paid to what students actually did when they wrote their papers. However, renewed attention resulted after studies were conducted by Britton (1970) and Emig (1971). In her study, Emig interviewed 12th graders as they wrote and studied the prewriting processes that one student used in depth. At the same time, Britton and his colleagues examined 2,000 essays written by British high-school students and found that students' writing processes differed according to the type of writing. Later, Donald Graves (1975) examined young children's writing and found that seven-year-olds, like high-school students, used a variety of strategies as they wrote. He recognized that children appeared to go through three general stages in writing: prewriting, writing and postwriting. As a result of Grave's research, the writing process, as we know it, was identified. The writing process has been defined as a way of looking at writing instruction in which the emphasis is shifted from students' finished products to what students think and do as they write As a result of these important studies on writing processes, teachers all over the United States and elsewhere paid more attention about what their students were doing to produce a final product.

Among the important ideas that emerged from these studies was the importance of providing students with strategies for prewriting. Some authorities say that the best thing writers can do is spend time and energy thinking about their topic before they start putting pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. Prewriting is often neglected, but it is crucial. According to Donald Murray (1982), 70% or more of writing time should be spent in prewriting. As a result, teachers at all educational levels--elementary through college--have

provided students with various concrete, specific strategies to try such as clustering, free writing, interviewing, listing, drawing, brainstorming. A student in my graduate class asked me several years ago if any of these strategies had been studied quantitatively in any way. And we agreed that most of the strategies originated from common sense or from observations about what worked or didn't work. Her question resulted in this interesting study.

**Methodology.** This study investigated the effects of four strategies on fifth- graders' idea production across three aims of discourse (informative, expressive and persuasive) and the effect of gender. The four strategies tested were clustering, drawing, freewriting, and thinking. All 100+ children from varied socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic groups in each of four fifth-grade, public-school classrooms participated in the study which took place in a southwestern, suburban city. The classes were heterogeneous with students randomly assigned to the various teachers. In the study, all members of a given class used the same strategy. Visible Drawers drew before writing their compositions and could see their drawings later as they wrote their compositions. Think Timers did no overt planning, but were asked to recall and think about what they knew and might write about their topic. In effect, Freewriters produced a draft by writing continuously and as rapidly as possible throughout the prewriting sessions inscribing as many of their topic-related thoughts as possible which they could refer to as needed during the study. Clusterers selected a keyword (or a short phrase) to represent their topic, wrote it in the center of a blank sheet of paper and framed it with an encircling line. Other words or phrases presenting related ideas of phenomena then were written the space around the keyword encircled and connected to related ideas with a line. After being taught their respective strategy and to write for various aims, the students each wrote three compositions: an expressive, an informative and a persuasive composition. One researcher was responsible for supervising all the writing sessions.

A modification of propositional analysis was used to score the 294 compositions written by the 98 children who were present for all six sessions (training and writing). Guided by the practical manual developed by Turner and Greene (1977) that provides explicit directions for analyzing text into propositional forms, papers were scored by raters for the number of written ideas the children expressed. The data were subjected to three tests of statistical significance. The study used a two-factor analysis of variance design with repeated measures on one factor. The fixed factors were drawing and discourse topic with the repeated measure being discourse topic which allowed for examination of the student's writing performance across the three aims of discourse.

**Results.** All three tests indicated that Freewriters and Clusterers produced significantly (.05) more written propositions than were produced by Visible Drawers and Think Timers. Two of the tests indicated that the Freewriters produced significantly more written ideas than were produced by Think Timers. Regardless of the aim for which the children wrote, Think Timers and Visible Drawers were always the least productive groups. However, in no case was the numerical difference between scores of these two least productive groups found to be statistically significant. The data also indicated that fifth-grade children can write for a variety of aims, although they tended to produce the greatest number of written ideas when writing informative papers and the fewest for persuasive. No statistically significant differences were found between the means of males who used a given strategy and the means of females who used that same strategy

**Discussion**. These findings were interpreted as evidence that using either the Clustering or Freewriting Strategy can increase the number of written ideas that fifth graders can produce. One possible reason for this is because these two strategies help students to remain task-focused because they call for production of a tangible, enduring graphic/product to use as a referent when writing. Conversely, Think Timers may have produced so few ideas because their strategy did not call for them to produce a tangible, enduring prewriting product, the result being that their thoughts tended to wander. Visible

Drawers may have produced fewer ideas because, while their strategy did call for production of a tangible an enduring product, they may have invested considerable time and effort in adding to or otherwise changing their drawings. To the extent that they did, they may have been left with relatively little time and effort to invest in the generation and contemplation of ideas for writing. It could also be true that the Visible Drawers were writing about content that was more complex and abstract than can be represented in a drawing. For example, the concept of patriotism would be difficult to directly represent in a picture. If Think Timer's thoughts focused on matters unrelated to their writing and if Visible Drawers neglected contemplation of writing-related knowledge, then these two groups have been somewhat impoverished in comparison to those students in the two most productive groups.

To whatever extent a given strategy was successful, that strategy was equally successful for both males and females. Interestingly, gender studies specifically focused on the relationship between drawing and writing (Millard, 1997) found that boys tended to work more quickly and sketchily when using drawing as a prewriting strategy while girls laboriously colored to create static individualized images or characters. Girls tended to draw stylized images of children, houses and flowers to provide decoration rather than attend to key aspects of the text in question. Girls in Millard's study spent time on decoration and embellishment, while boys focused on action, cartoon figures and scenarios. However, an in-depth analysis on gender differences and drawing strategies was not conducted in this study.

**Implications for Practice.** Three implications from this study are (a) that certain kinds of pre-writing planning strategies **do** support increases in fifth graders production of written propositions; (b) that asking children to produce a **tangible** pre-writing product can provide a powerful incentive for students to remain task focused; and (c) that the particular nature of the strategy probably makes a difference in how children will use the prewriting planning time. That is, the nature of the strategy probably helps determine

whether students will (a) use the prewriting time for idea generation as the Freewriters and Clusterers appear to have done, (b) or let their thoughts wander in non-task related ways as Think Timers appear to have done or (c) neglect recall and idea generation while focusing primarily on the prewriting strategy itself as the Visible Drawers appear to have done plus the fact that phenomena that are abstract and not visibly perceptible tend to be difficult or impossible to represent in a drawing. As the Think Timers demonstrated, students may not plan just because time is set aside for planning or because they are advised to do so or even if writing materials are withheld in an effort to induce prewriting planning. These measures in combination appear to have induced relatively little idea production for the Think Timers. This means that suggesting to students that they just sit there and think about the topic they want to write about may not be as helpful as another strategy.

If students use the freewriting strategy, which was a successful strategy for generating ideas in this study, they must be taught how to expand their notes when writing the second or follow-up texts so that their papers, based on the notes, are richer than were the original. Teaching time needs to be taken to show students how to glean ideas from their freewriting.

Like the freewriting strategy, the clustering strategy was successful in eliciting the production of ideas. At least two other variables add to the appeal of this strategy. The clustering strategy provides writers with a visual record of those terms they will probably use to represent their ideas and the configuration of the cluster also highlights relationships that can and do exist. That apparently gives students a head start on the ideas and the organization of the paper.

Flower and Hayes (1977) have suggested that all writers benefit from being able to call forth and use a number and variety of strategies. Indeed, nothing more than the novelty of being able to vary activities may stimulate students' imagination and efforts. That being true, teacher may want to instruct students in the use of these and other prewriting strategies.

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